

**Sodom and Gomorrah - Genesis 19****by Elodie Ballantine Emig (Denver Theological Seminary)**

Most scholars will divide the book of Genesis into two parts. The first section, chapters 1-11, deals with primeval history, the creation of the universe and the beginnings of the human race. In these few chapters we are taken from the very beginning of all things, through the creation and fall of humanity and its near annihilation by flood, to the “Table of Nations” and the story of the Tower of Babel. With these there comes a shift from primeval history, or pre-history, to history proper. The second section, chapters 12-50, treats patriarchal history. We are taken from God’s apparent disassociation from humanity in the Tower of Babel story, through the choosing and blessing of Abraham, to the long Joseph narrative and the presence of a distinct people of God in Egypt.

It is impossible to say with any certainty how many years (centuries? millennia?) these chapters span. Scholars cannot agree on how long creation took, much less the expanse of time from creation to the exodus. We are not even told what happened between the Tower and Abraham; we do not know how much time separates pre-history from history. We will accept, however, with the majority voice of modern scholarship that the patriarchs lived in the second millennium before Christ. To narrow things down a bit more, it is worth noting that what we know about ancient Near-Eastern history and archeology makes it plausible that Abraham journeyed from Haran to Canaan sometime between 2000 and 1800 B.C.

In favor of these dates are the relative peace and stability of the period, as well as the facts that there were roads between northwest Mesopotamia (Haran) and Canaan and that many places named in the patriarchal narratives were already in existence or were coming into being at that time (La Sor, Hubbard & Bush, *Old Testament Survey* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 103). The chief problem with the dates is that there is no evidence that the Negeb, where Abraham lived much of his life, was occupied that early (ibid.). All that the most careful scholars are willing to say is that “evidence presently available suggests that the patriarchal traditions for the most part fit best in the context of the early centuries of the second millennium (Middle Bronze II)” (John Bright, *A History of Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), 85). This will have to be close enough for us.

Perhaps more important to most of us than date per se, is what was going on during the patriarchal period. Genesis 11 leaves the reader wondering what will become of humanity’s relationship with God.

The story of the Tower of Babel concludes with God’s judgment on mankind; there is no word of grace. The whole primeval history, therefore, seems to break off in shrill dissonance... Is God’s relationship to the nations now finally broken; is God’s gracious forbearance now exhausted; has God rejected the nations in wrath forever? ...[I]ndeed, one can say that our narrator intended by means of the whole plan of his primeval history to raise precisely this question and to pose it in all its severity. Only then is the reader properly prepared to take up the strangely new thing that now follows the comfortless story about the building of the tower: the election and blessing of Abraham (von Rad quoted in La Sor, Hubbard and Bush, 86).

However God dealt with people between the tower and Abraham, we find a very personal relationship entered into in Genesis 12. After the genealogy in 11:27-32, which completes the transition from pre-history to Abraham's history, we find God simply speaking to Abram in chapter 12:1, "God said to Abram: Go..." Prior to this command, we assume that Abram was a polytheist; we know at least that he and his ancestors "served other gods" (Josh. 24:2). We will agree with the consensus of scholarship that, in asking Abram to go from his home to the land that He would show him, God was also asking Abram to leave his old religion for a relationship with Himself. Abram was asked to make a complete break from his past, but he was asked by a God who "revealed himself to him," chose him, made promises both to be with and to bless him and entered into a covenant with him (Ibid., 110). It should also be mentioned that Abram was addressed by a mobile God. God went with Abraham on his travels, unlike the Canaanite gods who "were primarily associated with places" (Ibid., 111).

Characteristic of this patriarchal religion is a close relationship between persons and the deity. This is illustrated by the form of personal names, by the expression "the God of my father," and above all by the stories themselves. This religion is pre-political; the God of the patriarchs has nothing to do with war. ... The patriarchs exhibit no knowledge of a large-scale cult with sacred space, sacred time, and sacred persons. In the patriarchal stories, worship is not yet a realm set apart from the rest of life; it is fully integrated into the way of life of the nomadic group. ... All transactions between God and human beings are direct, requiring no mediator (Claus Westermann, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 93).

So Abram entered into relationship with God and went with Lot, his nephew, and both of their families to Canaan. After they arrived in the land, they went through to Shechem, where God appeared to Abram and said, "To your seed I will give this land" (12:7). Abram built an altar for God in Shechem and then set out to the hill country east of Bethel, where he and those with him encamped (12:7-8). Then Abram journeyed on toward the Negeb (12:9). We assume that Abram stayed in the Negeb, "from the hill country of Judah to the wilderness of Sin" (Ibid., 101), until famine forced him to go south to Egypt (12:10).

Genesis 13 brings Abram and his family, certainly richer and possibly wiser, back from Egypt to the Negeb and then to Bethel. There arose problems between Abram's household and that of Lot. They had become so rich in livestock that there was not room for both of them between Bethel and Ai. So Abram suggested that they part company and offered Lot the pick of the territory. Lot chose the Jordan plain and encamped in Sodom; Abram stayed in Canaan. We are told only that the people of Sodom were wicked and sinned greatly against the Lord (12:13). With the exception of Abram's rescue of Lot from captivity in chapter 14, we read nothing of Lot or Sodom again until chapter 18, where we find that the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah is about to be judged by God.

Genesis 18 begins with a theophany, although Abraham (Abram became Abraham in Gen. 17) was not immediately aware of the fact. The Lord appeared to Abraham near the trees of Mamre. The purpose for the visit seems to have been twofold: to inform Abraham that 1, he would be blessed with a son in his old age (18:1-15); and 2, God was about to investigate and judge Sodom and Gomorrah (18:16-33).

For different reasons, both of these purposes, or the narratives recounting them, are germane to an understanding of Genesis 19.

As far as the first part of chapter 18 is concerned, many scholars have noted the parallels between the accounts of visitors (3 "men") coming to Abraham and those (2 "angels") coming to Lot (19:1). In fact, two of the visitors are the same and have been recognized as angels or messengers since the beginning of the account in 18:1. Significant to us is that both Abraham and Lot sought to show these visitors hospitality. Hospitality was a cardinal virtue in the ancient Near East, among nomads and settled peoples alike.

Hospitality in the ancient Near East played a distinctly important role in tribal and domestic life. Existence in the desert made it a necessity, and among the nomads it became a highly esteemed virtue. By it the stranger or weary traveler found rest, food, and shelter, and asylum. ... Customarily, one could remain under his host's roof for three days in safety, and receive protection for a given time after leaving (Tenney, ed., *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan: 1077), s.v., "Hospitality," by G.B. Funderburk.).

As for the second part of chapter 18, the link may be even clearer. Abraham's discussion with the Lord sets the stage for Lot's visitation. After Abraham had shown his visitors lavish hospitality, the three prepared to leave. As they did so, they looked down on the city of Sodom, and the Lord said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?" The two angels left at that point and went on their way to Sodom; the Lord stayed and talked with Abraham. He added, "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me."

Abraham pleaded with the Lord on behalf of any righteous people there might have been in Sodom. He wrangled with God until the latter promised, "For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it." Then the Lord left, and Abraham went home.

Chapter 19 begins with the two angels arriving in Sodom and meeting Lot at the city gates. A couple of observations should be made here. First, Lot, not a native of Sodom, but an alien, welcomes the visitors and invites them home. In his commentary on Genesis, G.J. Wenham wonders whether this fact suggests that the people of Sodom were completely lacking in hospitality, or that Lot was particularly estranged from them (*Genesis 1-15* (Waco: Word, 1987), 54). Second, when the visitors refuse his invitation, odd in itself, Lot compels (a rare and extremely urgent Hebrew verb) them to accept.

I think we may take Lot's strong-arming reaction to his would-be guests as indication that Wenham's query should be answered with a "both and." We may also see the two as related: Lot was particularly estranged from the people of Sodom because, among other things, they were the antithesis of hospitality. Lot felt a duty to protect the strangers from the people of the city.

Lot prevailed; the visitors went home and had dinner with him. Sometime later Genesis tells us that "all" the men from Sodom surrounded Lot's house and demanded the strangers be sent out to them. The men of Sodom wanted to "know" the visitors. Lot's response to this seemingly vague request was extremely clear; he offered his virgin daughters. However difficult it may be for those of us today to accept the notion, Lot considered his duty as a host over his duty as a father. Given ancient Near Eastern mores, what he did was acceptable.

The men of Sodom, however, were not impressed with the offer, nor with Lot's entreaty "not to do this wicked thing." In fact, they were furious. They told Lot to get out of their way and went on with, "This fellow came here as an alien, and now he wants to play the judge! We'll treat you worse than them." At that point the angels made use of their superior/supernatural power. They pulled Lot back into his house, struck the men of Sodom blind and prepared to rescue Lot and his family from the soon-to-be-destroyed city. The visitors had the information for which they had come. On the basis of this mob scene, they concluded that the news which had reached God's ears was accurate and that Sodom was worthy of destruction.

Having taken a brief look at the story, let us consider the interpretive problem to which it has given rise. Although there are a number of minor problems associated with the interpretation of this story, they all relate to an over-arching question: for what sin(s) was Sodom destroyed? It is my opinion that Sodom, as well as Gomorrah, was destroyed for over-all sinfulness. In an oracle given to the prophet Isaiah, the Lord likened Israel to Sodom and Gomorrah, because the people's hands were covered with blood. They were not seeking justice for the oppressed, the widows and orphans (Isa. 1:10-17). Through Jeremiah, the Lord denounced false prophets in Jerusalem, calling them liars, adulterers and those who encourage evildoers like [the people of] Sodom and Gomorrah (Jer. 23:14). And again, through Ezekiel, the Lord, in an effort to shame Israel, said that the sin of Sodom was that, "She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and the needy. They were haughty and did detestable things before me" (Ezek. 16:49-50).

Revisionist exegesis has made much of the fact that homosexuality is not mentioned in the prophetic assessment of the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah. To this I would make two replies. First, all three of the above oracles were intended to get Israel, not Sodom, to repent of its own sin and return to God. Since homosexuality was not much of a problem in Israel (even if we accept the existence of male cult prostitutes during the divided monarchy), there was no reason for God to mention it. In Isaiah and Jeremiah, the Lord's point to Israel was that it was following in the footsteps of Sodom and Gomorrah. Had homosexuality been mentioned, Israel could easily have squirmed out from under the indictment because it didn't apply to them; whereas, second, in Ezekiel, the Lord mentioned "detestable things." As we saw in Leviticus, God considered homosexuality a detestable thing. Moreover, in Ezekiel, God told Israel that it had done what was worse than what Sodom and Gomorrah had done. So where a mention of homosexuality in Isaiah or Jeremiah would have been counter-productive, one would have fit quite well in Ezekiel.

If we read these prophets in the context of God's relationship with Israel, we will not find the lack of an explicit reference to homosexuality very surprising. At the same time, given the particular slant of Ezekiel, neither should we conclude that homosexuality was absent from God's thought. Again, Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed for numerous sins, homosexuality among them. To substantiate such a statement, I must return to Genesis 19.

Most revisionists will admit that the Hebrew verb *yada*, to know, has sexual connotations in context of Genesis 19. Though carnal knowledge isn't the primary, or even tertiary, meaning of *yada*, Lot's response to the men of Sodom makes it abundantly plain that their intentions were sexual. Still, revisionists pose some excellent questions. For example, isn't the sin of the men of Sodom gang rape, rather than homosexuality? Certainly, if the men had had their way, homosexual gang rape would have been their crime. But it does not necessarily follow that gang rape is wrong, where the homosexuality underlying it is not. "How do we know that they were homosexuals?" might be the next question. A quick answer would be that the men of Sodom refused Lot's daughters as a substitute for the visitors. We will still have to reckon with the problem of whether it is plausible that "all" the men of a city were gay. I will freely admit that even if we take "all" as hyperbolic, it is unlikely that many or most of the men of Sodom were exclusively homosexual. There couldn't have been much of a population if that were the case. I will grant to the revisionist that bisexuality and male aggression were probably more to the point. I remain unsure of what this does for the revisionist case. Since it is clear from the story that the men wanted to have relations with the visitors, not Lot's daughters, the best possible spin we can put on things is that the men of Sodom, in utter repudiation of contemporary hospitality, wished to rape the visitors to demonstrate their superiority over them. However far we remove the scenario from loving, mutual and monogamous homosexuality, we still haven't gotten around the fact that men sleeping with men is detestable to God. Homosexual gang rape is still homosexual and as such prohibited elsewhere in Scripture.

The Metropolitan Community Church suggests that Lot offered his daughters knowing that the men of Sodom had "heterosexual interests" (MCC pamphlet). Although, as I said above, they may have; I think this misses the point entirely. First of all, Scripture does not tell us whether or not Lot had any sons; he may have had no one else to offer. Or, if we assume that a man who had too much livestock to live along side Abraham any longer must have also had males in his household, we might also assume that homosexuality was more objectionable to him than rape. Before Lot made the offer of his daughters, he pleaded with the men of the city not to "do this wicked thing" (19:7). Then he offered his daughters, giving them the opportunity to do what Lot believed was a less wicked thing. Lot's main point, I believe, was a value judgment: not that daughters are less valuable than sons (though that case has certainly been made by feminist writers), but that, even in the context of gang rape, heterosexuality is to be preferred over homosexuality. Unless we are to believe that Lot was a vile coward (and there are many more liberal scholars, not just feminists and revisionists, who are open to cowardice as a motivator for Lot, e.g. Gagnon), who offered his daughters rather than himself, we must rather conclude that Lot did what he honestly thought was right. Whether or not he was appealing to any known heterosexual interest among the men of Sodom, he was appealing to their, albeit seared, consciences.

It has been suggested that Sodom's sin was a lack of hospitality. I would call the suggestion a grotesque understatement. Of course they lacked hospitality! Surely it is disingenuous to so accuse the men of Sodom and not go on to examine how the inhospitality demonstrated itself. Homosexual activity was certainly among the reasons for the destruction of Sodom. Still, I do wish to emphasize the word "among." As the prophets discussed above amply demonstrate, homosexuality was not the only sin for which the cities of the plain were judged, nor even the crowning sin. Chronologically, it was the final sin, or among them, and the one which convinced the angels that Sodom's cup of iniquity was full. To that extent it was a crowning and earth-shatteringly (scorchingly?) significant sin. Nevertheless, I do not believe that homosexual activity is any more or less sinful than the arrogance of which Sodom was guilty. The people of Sodom and Gomorrah were sinful in every aspect of their lives.

Many scholars have noted the similarities between the Sodom and flood stories. I am convinced that those parallels go beyond the literary. In both instances, God had become totally fed up with the respective inhabitants and convinced that they were beyond repentance. I do not believe that God destroys, whether by flood or by fire, if there is hope that the people about to be judged will turn to Him. God had given up on Sodom and Gomorrah, only Lot, his wife and daughters were offered safety. This is so because the people of those cities were completely depraved -- socially, morally, intellectually etc. They were arrogant, inhospitable, materialistic, selfish, oppressive and sexually perverse. They were destroyed not for any one sin, but an all pervasive sinfulness which, if crowned by anything, was crowned by unrepentance. So, while I agree with revisionists that homosexuality was not the chief sin of Sodom, at the same time I maintain that it was as essential a component of their sinfulness as were arrogance and greed. The inhabitants of those cities were condemned for a life style wholly given over to rejection of the one, true God and His self-revelation. What we may learn from this story is that homosexual activity was part and parcel of a totally depraved culture. As we consider our own culture, such a lesson should give us pause.